

Making livelihoods within communities of practice: The place of guild organisations in the craft sector.

Nicola J. Thomas and Doreen Jakob

Book Chapter

The Organisation of Craft Work: Identities, Meanings and Materiality

Emma Bell, Gianluigi Mangia, Scott Taylor, Maria Laura Toraldo

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This chapter interrogates the place of professional networks as communities of practice for craft practitioners who live in remote, rural locations and make their livelihood from their creative practice. The South West region of Britain, has a significant population of craft makers working in a highly distributed manner. Some makers work in small clusters (Harvey et al. 2012) but many work in their own homes or individual workshops. Through in depth qualitative analysis, it locates the ways in which makers develop or join organisations to support their livelihoods, particularly those that distinguish the quality and value of the skilled labour that makes hand-crafted work. Specifically, it explores the role of regional craft guilds for their members, and what members value about these organisations.

Makers in rural locations gain access to peer support, develop their practice and gain the benefits of networking, despite lack of geographical proximity. While clusters are often valued for the benefits of networking and spill-over effects of co-working (Storper & Venables 2004), many craft practitioners find isolation from other makers to be part of their

creative life. Although urban based craft makers may find themselves similarly isolated, rural practitioners are likely to be faced with greater barriers to participation in a creative network, through high costs or lack of availability of transport, or by living in remote places that have a weak creative infrastructure (see Gibson et al. 2010; Bell & Jayne 2010).

The challenge of enabling the positive benefits to dispersed makers that arise from social connection has been recognised within UK rural policy initiatives since the 1920s. The UK Government established the Rural Industries Bureau in 1921 and put in place officers tasked with supporting the agricultural and rural industrial sector (Bailey 1996). At the time, craft industries in rural areas ranged from those who served agricultural industry, such as wheelwrights and blacksmiths, to industrial commercial crafts, including potteries and craft practitioners inspired by the aesthetic dimensions of decorative and functional craft. The aim of the Rural Industries Bureau was to support diverse rural craft workers and improve their livelihoods, encourage businesses to modernise or respond to new markets, offer professional support and business development, and encourage new businesses to locate in the countryside. The Rural Industries Bureau supported the development of regionally based craft organisations that brought together similarly high skilled professional crafts practitioners intent on supporting each other to sell their work through new retail opportunities (Thomas forthcoming).

These networks were often called ‘guilds’, drawing on the established medieval craft membership structures that the arts and crafts movement had revived. The Rural Industries Bureau encouraged development of county-wide craft guilds that were crafts person led, with the support of a local officer employed by the Bureau. Early examples in the South West were the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen, founded in 1933 and the Devon Guild of

Craftsmen established 1955 (Thomas 2012; Thomas forthcoming). These guilds encompassed a range of materials-based practices of craft making including blacksmiths, basket makers, potters, weavers, silversmiths, boat builders and print-makers. The organisation of these guilds revolved around exhibitions of members work that were offered for sale, showing the makers' work together in a diverse display. A distinctive feature of these guilds was the quality of work, undertaken by people who were highly skilled, made their income from their craft practice and were considered to be designers as well as craft practitioners.

Given that rural guilds were developed to enable members to access new retail markets, it is important to note the change in retail environment that has evolved in the craft sector over the last 80 years, and to consider this in relation to the ongoing value of the guild organisations. In the 1930's retail outlets for design craft were scarce, often found in larger cities, such as the Red Rose Gallery in Manchester. The Rural Industries Bureau identified a lack of local markets and encouraged the guilds to develop local patronage through seasonal 'pop-up' retail exhibitions. This practice continues today. Such fairs and festival now take place across the UK and continue to diversify and grow in number. Direct selling to the public has a long tradition within the craft sector. This includes via the Open Studio movement where clusters of makers and artists advertise the studio openings and tours. Crafts practitioners also work with galleries who offer boutique retail experiences. Alongside these face-to-face retail markets, online selling has transformed the craft sector with online platforms such as etsy.com, and niche craft online platforms like madebyhandonline.com offering makers the opportunity to sell direct to customers. With all these retail opportunities, it is important to consider why craft guild organisations continue to be viable given that they were originally formed to enable access to retail markets when there were few alternatives in rural areas.

Although the range of retail opportunities open to makers has increased, it often continues to be a struggle to make a viable livelihood. The market for handcrafted items remains niche, particularly in challenging economic times. Makers often depend on a portfolio of teaching or other employment to supplement their income from selling their work. Locating customers who want to invest in quality, hand-crafted items means makers need to seek out organisations that attract these consumers. Identifying and supporting quality craft practice has been the remit of the regional guilds since their inception. This chapter focuses on the Devon Guild of Craftsmen and the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen. These guilds have around 400 members between them and are steadily growing. Between 2012 and 2015 the authors undertook an Arts and Humanities Research Council funded research project that utilised mixed qualitative methods to interrogate the reasons why these guilds have survived throughout the 20th century and explore with current members and staff the importance of these organisations in the contemporary creative economy. Through 40 in-depth interviews, a survey of guild members (167 responses), participant observation at guild events, and discourse analysis of guild archives we examined the place of geographically organised craft guilds in the UK's creative economy, past and present.

The two guilds were chosen as case studies because they share similarities but have slightly different trajectories of development. Both are membership organisations serving professional designer-makers. At time of writing the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen has around 80 members and The Devon Guild of Craftsmen has around 270 members. Until 1985 both guilds were similar in scale and activity, functioning as maker-led networks, managed by a committee of members. The Devon Guild's increased size dates from a decision in 1985 to invest in a formal headquarters which incorporates a large exhibition space, retail gallery and cafe. In recent years, it has received core funding from the Arts Council as one of its

National Portfolio Organisations. It is known as an exhibition space for contemporary craft and touring exhibitions, has a well-developed craft education and community crafts programme, offers a programme of maker development support, commissions new work when supported by grant funding, all enabled by a professional staff who drive the organisation. The Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen retains the spirit of the maker-led guild, organised by the guild's committee, with the help of a paid administrator and retail manager. The guild has always had some form of retail gallery space, 'The Guild at 51', situated within The Wilson, a gallery and museum in Cheltenham. Highlights of the guild year are the regular seasonal pop-up exhibitions which take place over a few days to a couple of weeks and bring guild craft out to the market towns for local audiences to purchase. The Gloucestershire Guild supports craft education through regular workshops and demonstrations organised by members.

We start the chapter by spending time with Susan Early, a basket maker, working in willow and foraged hedgerow materials. This attention, first and foremost, to the individual members, echoes the process of our research. To understand the importance of the guild in a maker's life, we used an ethnographic approach, spending time with makers, sitting in their studios, talking with them as they worked. As they talked, their 'guild life' unfolded, allowing us to see the small ways in which deep associations with the organisations were made. It has been important to keep individuals like Susan centre stage in our research, recognising that each member in a guild has these rich stories and associations. We contextualise the themes of Susan's stories by considering how guilds might be regarded as communities of practice, drawing on the extensive literature inspired by the work of Lave and Wenger (1991). We then go on to draw on survey data to explore the elements of this community of practice, the processes of joining, how members participate in the guild, the

senses of belonging that this engenders and the process through which the guilds have changed over time.

Making a livelihood

Susan has been a member of the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen since 2007. She developed her interest in basket making as a recreational pursuit while her children were young, and then deepened her skills and interests through continued practice, taking further courses and completing a degree in Visual Arts in 2005. An unexpected request to run basket making workshops at the Victoria and Albert Museum (V&A) in London, shortly after her graduation led Susan to focus her attention on how she could make a livelihood from her craft practice:

I finished my degree, was busy looking for a job when a friend of my sister's, a curator at the V&A, saw one of my baskets and asked if I would do a demonstration at the V&A, which threw me a bit but because I was looking for a job, I said yes without thinking really because I'd done basket making for a long time. [...] [I] set up some classes in the village, [and] started teaching on a weekly basis so I'd know all the answers [to questions V&A visitors might ask]. [...] The classes went well, I started being asked to do more classes, started making more baskets, did sales at the village hall and then Annie Hewitt from the guild saw my baskets and asked if I'd be interested in being a member of the guild. So, I joined the guild and it's gone on from there really.

Susan now has a wide portfolio of work: making public commissions, functional baskets, abstract forms, and teaching basket making to others. She joined the guild as an Associate

member, a scheme that enables emerging professional makers to gain access to the guild network, whilst developing their practice. This two-year period gives members the opportunity to settle into their work and get support and advice from a mentor in the guild. For Susan, this time as an Associate allowed her time to develop her livelihood and professional identity: ‘you continue to progress and improve and take your work further and actually, it was just what I needed, just at the right time because it really, really focused my thoughts and I thought ‘I’ve got to be focused and make something beautiful, as well as useful.’ The relationship between mentor and Associate member is one that can create a powerful and long-lasting relationship. Susan’s mentor was furniture maker Paul Spriggs, whose respect and understanding of the arts and crafts traditions of the Cotswolds infused his own work.

Susan is a modest maker, who may not have applied to the guild had she not been encouraged: ‘I probably felt, it was lovely that Annie asked me, and it was perfect timing for me, but I think I was slightly insecure about my own ability... I certainly wouldn't have approached them.’ The importance of the guild being open to new members and encouraging creative talent was important for Susan’s own career. When talking about the guild, Susan often returns to discuss the standard of work and the reputation of the guild. Susan could remember going to the guild exhibitions as a child: ‘I was brought up around here and my parents used to take us to the Gloucester Guild of Craftsmen’s Exhibition every year in Painswick ... I remember being quite in awe of the quality of the work, so in fact when I was asked to be in the guild, I was quite concerned I wasn’t good enough...’. Alongside her mentor, other guild members affirmed that her work was improving through her years as an Associate: ‘I found other members very helpful, nobody has ever said a negative as such, but it’s the positives that come through: ‘those look really good’ [they] notice a change or

something, which is just very, very nice... [a] positive affirmation. I think it is just the quality, constantly trying to improve quality.'

Alongside the positive affirmation that she was producing good quality work when she joined, guild membership for Susan emerges as a driver to keep improving the quality of her work: 'It makes you keep or attempt to keep standards up, I think you put those on yourself by being a member'. The process of reflecting on her professional practice is something that Susan has undertaken, working with other master basket makers and she views her guild membership as a key element in the ongoing pursuit to continue improving the quality of her work: 'I've since been to a number of master basket makers and gradually really, turned round and looked at my baskets thoughtfully and mindfully and the guild has helped that incredibly.'

For many makers, the diversity of skills required to run their business is challenging.

Alongside making their work, crafts practitioners often need to be able to take professional quality photographs of their work; organise the sale and marketing of products; run social media promotions; keep accounts in order; maintain studio space; manage a website which increasingly includes an online shop; manage client relationships; locate and supply galleries and retail outlets; apply for exhibitions, commissions, and grant funded projects; prepare and deliver teaching or projects to different publics; order materials and maintain stock levels.

These tasks require a diverse portfolio of skills which can stretch a maker's abilities and knowledge base. It is common for professional makers to be sole traders in their business, possibly supported by a family member, but often individually responsible for securing the success of their business. Susan is no exception and looked to the guild as a way of accessing support for the wide portfolio of activities that she needed to become accomplished at as a

new professional maker. Susan was able to get help with elements of the business skills portfolio that she needed to be on top of to maintain her livelihood: ‘Nick Ozane who’s the administrator, he’s been brilliant ... he has given me I think three mornings computer help, just helping me set up things as basic as invoice things, to speed things up, mailing lists, which has made a huge difference’.

The guild offers a permanent retail sales outlet for Susan’s work: ‘it’s a great place to have one’s work displayed’, particularly as she is ‘not terribly computer literate or interested in that business side of things’. The guild shop becomes a place ‘where I’ve always got work, so people can ask me about my work, and always beautifully displayed. I’ve always got somewhere to put it which is really very helpful, alongside other people’s work which I think is a great standard and you wouldn’t want to let each other down’. Susan sells her work in different outlets, but the guild shop and exhibitions are a regular part of her portfolio. Developing her work to sell at the guild as an Associate meant Susan had to learn how to price her work: ‘The other thing the guild has been very helpful about is costing because although we give a percentage to the guild, that’s to us really because we’re all part of it, you can learn where to price things or how to price things’. Being a member of the guild and visible on their website is again about being recognised as producing work to a certain standard, which is important on applications for grants, fellowships and commissions: ‘being a part of the guild, does imply a certain standard.’ Susan indicates that she is not dependant on sales through the guild but sees the investment as ‘a hugely brilliant place to advertise myself’. In February 2018 this was taken literally, as she set up her workshop in the window of the guild’s shop for a week, allowing passers-by to see her demonstrating and making new work, alongside a special exhibition of her work for sale in the shop.

For many individual makers who work in isolation, whether by choice or by necessity, joining a guild offers access to peers and the potential for conversations that support a livelihood. Susan found unexpected friendship through the guild: ‘having lived here for years, I certainly wasn’t joining the guild to try and get to know people, but I have found getting to know other makers, who actually then end up being in a similar situation to yourself, it’s been really, really good actually, I’ve been surprised at how lovely it’s been’. The companionable element of the guild emerges through planning meetings, putting up exhibitions, delivering work to the shop and attending member events. The guild appears to become gradually woven into people’s lives, the rhythms of the guild year creating associated rhythms of social connection. Susan’s integration within the guild was shown in the 80th Anniversary year when she co-designed the Summer Show, placing her at the centre of the key selling event for the guild. Susan recently worked with another maker, Sarah Cant on a collaborative project ‘Two Make’ which was curated to support members continued professional development. As a new mother, Sarah brought her baby to the development days where she and Susan worked on their joint project. Throughout the research the idea of a ‘guild life’ emerged, with long-standing members lives becoming interwoven with other members, through the exchange of objects used on a daily basis, skills shared, and companionship gained. Sometimes, this mutuality is made visible in the most meaningful ways: for instance, when Susan’s mentor died she was asked to make his coffin.

The guild as a community of practice

Listening to members like Susan and witnessing the activities of the regional craft guilds through the research, pointed us to consideration of the communities of practice literatures. Communities of practice have been the subject of considerable analysis and debate since the

publication of Lave and Wenger's (1991) sociological theorisation of communities of practice as self-organising structures, followed by Wenger's (1998) thesis presenting communities of practices as 'social learning systems' that 'explain mutual learning and knowledge exchange' (Bolisani & Scarso, 2014). When one considers the key characteristics of a community of practice identified by Wenger (1998: 125-6, cited in Roberts, 2006: 625) one can immediately see the attraction of placing craft guilds within this frame of analysis. The act of selection creates a strong bond between members; practices of governance that have evolved over time enable the resolution of conflict and smooth running of the group; exhibitions that have an annual cycle with a well-oiled machinery to make them happen based on clear divisions of labour; friendships between members spill out beyond the guild; long serving committee members reporting their service with pride; there are reports of ease of participation for new members those who are admitted; members share mutual admiration for work of a similar quality; there is an easy exchange of help, materials and skills; members know stories of past members and activities, and these histories of the guild endure through oral traditions and create a sense of share belonging. All these characteristics chime as productive examples of a community of practice. Indeed, Wenger thought his approach to understanding situated learning, and how communities of practice acted as the mechanism through which knowledge was held, transferred and created, was well witnessed in third sector and voluntary contexts.

There is however a danger of reifying this community into a warm, homogenous group, that is positive, experienced and valued equally by all. One of the critiques of the communities of practice literature is that it doesn't account for power, and the messy politics of social relations, the difference that spatial diffusion makes, and a detailed attention to the practices that underscore the practices of the communities as they evolve (Roberts 2006; Amin &

Roberts, 2008; Handley et al., 2006). Attending to the fissures that emerge in these organisations has been important in exploring how guilds function and the role they play in makers lives. In addition, if these long-standing guilds are to be seen as good models of peer-support that could be replicated, understanding these challenges and how these have been navigated is critical.

These two organisational case studies enabled us to collect data from a large cohort of professional designer-makers who have successfully forged their livelihood in rural areas. Understanding their motivations for joining a membership organisation, and their reasons for supporting it, enabled us to learn about the professional needs of crafts practitioners in the contemporary creative economy. Paying attention to the way in which makers value their guild membership and the practices of the guild enabled us to consider what makes these organisations robust communities of practice. We should ward against over-romanticism such organisations simply because they have been sustained over long periods of time. Instead we should use them to understand how organisations might serve the needs of contemporary craft workers, and the challenges for enabling dispersed rural creative workers to gain the advantages of working together in mutually supportive ways.

The original impetus to undertake this research was driven by recognition that for several decades, guild organisations had successfully served a growing membership and navigated the challenges of sustaining a grass roots, volunteer maker-led network. Each guild had followed a slightly different path with varying degrees of professional administration but maintained their status as member-led organisations. For a sector that is dominated by sole practitioners, the organisations offered something that makers valued, and wished to invest in, year after year. The creative industries sector often overlooks the crafts, as a sector of limited

economic value, however, craft guilds, as modes of organisational support, may in fact offer much to the wider creative economy. They have shown how it is possible to sustain and improve the livelihoods of dispersed creative workers who wish to connect to their peers, gain validation, receive recognition, and ensure that the outputs of their creative labour are appropriately placed in the market.

Achieving membership within a craft community of practice

To join the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen or the Devon Guild of Craftsmen a maker must put forward an application including examples of their work and a written explanation of their craft practice. Both guilds have committees which meet to discuss prospective members work and to judge it against their collective understanding of what makes up ‘guild quality’. This takes into account the skill of the maker, their individual style and design qualities, quality of the product, and attention placed on the finish of the work. A maker is expected to have a style that is recognisably theirs, not derivative, and individual elements are expected to make up a coherent portfolio of work. Both guilds accept makers who have professional standards, with Associate membership being available for those who are starting out on their career path.

The ongoing work of maintaining the standard of the guild is seen by some as a collective effort: ‘it is up to present members to ensure this excellent standard and good presentation of work continues’. This journey starts when a prospective new member applies, and the selection and election committee judge the quality of their work. In both guilds, the selection and election committee is comprised mainly from the current membership, with the Devon Guild of Craftsmen also having an external member with expertise in contemporary craft

practice. Serving on the selection and election committee is seen as a responsible job, which is much sought after by members. It offers a form of professional development as committee members use the experience to reflect on their own practice, and to learn from the critique that they exchange with other members. As one member noted, they felt they actively took part in shaping the guild: ‘by supporting the guild... election/selection committee which helps me to keep me informed about makers, other disciplines, and in touch with other members, and helps me question what standards and criteria should apply to incoming work and how that reflects upon my own’.

The processes of gaining entry to a community of practice are a key element of the organisational dynamic of a community of practice (Ash & Roberts 2008: 357). How a community of practice opens itself to new members who is admitted, on what basis, and how they get inducted into the cultures of the organisation is critical. Going through the selection process was noted by members to be a challenging process. The preparation of a portfolio of work for consideration by peers with the associated judgement of success or failure placed members at emotional risk. How this process was managed and communicated clearly left its mark on some members who used the research survey to recall their experiences of going through the selection process. Some chose to draw attention to what they perceived to be the subjective judgements of the committee members, and noted that when they reapplied, ‘the membership had changed and they successfully admitted with the same portfolio to a different section panel’. Others recalled the reasons they were originally rejected: ‘that the work didn’t show enough range of ambition technically and artistically’. In response to this feedback the same member told us that ‘time and experience’ resolve this weakness; ‘I reapplied a number of years later and the showed a wider range [of work]’. Care is taken by the guild to ensure that a discipline specific maker is part of the judging panel for a

prospective makers work: this allows specific feedback to be received on a failed application 'I received a letter from the jeweller on the interview board'. Another member who was rejected as a full member was accepted as an Associate 'I had only just started my own business after leaving college - so they felt it needed time to develop... a long-standing member of the guild became my mentor'. For some prospective members, the selection committee drew attention to parts of their work where the quality of finish might be improved such as the use of a handmade catch to a necklace over a machine produced component. Attending to such small but important feedback resulted in a successful membership application.

Being granted membership is by no means certain, indeed, the archives of both guilds have letters and emails written to unsuccessful applicants telling them why their work was not deemed to be of 'guild quality'. Some unsuccessful members take considerable umbrage and harbour hurt pride and sever their desire to join the guilds. This is a site where power plays out. The criteria for membership are challenging to maintain, where members work is expected to be unique, show personal style and originality, whilst being of the highest quality standard. As craft practices change and greater use of technology is incorporated (such as laser cutting and 3D printing) the responsibilities of the selection and election committee need to move with the current practice to ensure that the Guild does not stagnate. As one member suggested, there is a 'danger in the respected guild system becoming an anachronism'. Here members noted that the guild 'has to adapt to new ways of practice, become relevant to younger members' and to ensure that they are 'adapting to current models, younger makers, the traditional with the new, waking people up to contemporary making without denying the craft tradition'. Such reflections on the discourse of handwork, importance of craft traditions alongside the incorporation of new technology and

contemporary techniques were seen in both guilds. Both openly supported and encouraged new practices to be showcased within the guilds, which was noted within the research project as a marker of these membership guilds as sites which supported innovation and change. Here we see the community of practice needing to shift its terms of entry as the meaning of craft changes, in response to new technologies, aesthetics and the demands of the market.

For those that do make the bar of membership they are aware of the positive value of the mark of distinction that guild membership brings to their work. Members report that guild membership means that they have received the ‘kite mark for quality’ or been admitted to a guild that has established a ‘tradition of excellence and bar of standard’. Joining a long-established guild is important for some who note ‘the history gives guild status and kudos’. The longevity of both guilds and the reputation they have forged over time was marked in many members responses. For members in Gloucestershire this was particularly important. In this region, the weight of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century arts and crafts movement looms large which places additional significance on the regional craft guild maintaining standards of excellence. A Gloucestershire Guild member noted ‘it is a stand[ard] of enduring excellence which provides reassurance to clients of the guild and a sense of belonging to culture inheritance’. For another member, the ‘illustrious history validates one’s own work’ and for another the ‘prestigious’ nature of the organisation and importance for ‘quality assurance’ were key motivations for applying to join.

Sustaining a community of practice: the value of membership

The attraction of joining the guild encompasses many different elements. An open response questionnaire to all guild members elicited varied responses which reflect the range of ways

makers look to the guild for support. For many, guild membership was about achieving ‘recognition for skills I had accumulated’. For another member ‘to get the recognition that my work was good enough to be a member’. This recognition might be a personal affirmation in a field where individuals don’t receive regular reviews and appraisals of their work. It also however acts as a public affirmation of their quality, with a respondent noting they joined the guild: ‘to have the backing of a guild as a form of quality control’. Being seen as an equal amongst peers often emerged as an important for joining the guild, with responses like this common: ‘to exhibit my work with others whose work standards I admired’. Gaining recognition associated with a certain standard, was a key driver for many respondents in joining the guild, as explained by one member: ‘to increase my profile in the quality craft world’ and ‘reach the public from a respected platform’. In a crowded market place, where quality is difficult to judge, the idea of the guild as a place that holds up standards is attractive. This is also true for galleries, particularly where they may not have expertise in craft disciplines. One member explained that they joined the guild in response to ‘peer pressure from a couple of galleries I supply’. Here the guild maybe seen to act as a clearing house, affirming the quality of a maker work, which is used by external organisations in their decision-making process to stock their work.

For many members, the opportunities provided by the guild to enable them to make money from their craft was central, as one member summarised: ‘there is substantial financial pressure on members to make a living and the guild can play an important part in that’. Many makers were clear that the guild opened up ‘exhibition opportunities’ and the ability ‘to sell work, have status, contacts, advertising’. In these terms joining the guild is a business transaction to improve their livelihood, particularly important for some in the early stage of their career as they shared that they joined to guild ‘to develop my career when I was getting

established'. For those with a livelihood already established, reaching new audiences for their work was a reason to join the guild. A respondent noted their membership enabled them 'to expand the commercial reach of my business'. Both guilds were originally created to support the selling of rural craftspeople's work within an organisation that protected quality and standard. These driving forces remain central to members, with members finding categories such as access to new customers, mark of quality, marketing a promotion, exhibition spaces and gallery shop sales being very important to the way in which they gain benefit from their guild membership.

The role of peer mentoring and as a trusted place to gain hands on advice was witnessed throughout the research. The attraction of being 'part of the support group of local craftsmen' motivated one member to join the guild, another member articulated the same sentiment: 'to gain the opportunity to ask questions about specific problems that might arise with various aspects of my craft'. For others, the attraction lay in the organisational structure: 'I also keen on being part of a well-established cooperative'. The recognition of the guild as a space of mutuality was frequently noted through the research, with members often giving value to the spirit of collective action that the guild ethos signals: 'it's important that craftspeople joined together to create the guild. They also created a spirit of support which is still very much part of the guild'. The importance of this collaborative spirit emerged in different ways for different members. The work that the guilds do in advocating for makers and campaigning for craft played a role in this member's decision to join the guild: 'to have a voice in issues affecting makers'. This reason draws attention to the challenge for sole practitioners of making their voices collectively heard. Seeing craft development organisations like the guilds as a way of enabling a collective voice to be heard is reminiscent of the role of medieval guilds in protecting the labour rights of the members.

Developing practices of mutuality within a community of practice

The ethos of mutuality that underlined the founding of the regional craft guilds have continued to exist in the way in which guild members discuss their sense of belonging. The research undertaken went on to interrogate if members did actually participate in the guild and receive benefits of mutuality. Many members had different ways of participating, reflecting the diverse ways in which a member might interact with a networked organisation. A more transactional response to the question: ‘how do you participate?’ generated the response ‘I pay my subscription and supply stock [for the retail shop]’. Other responses indicate the way in which a member might take part in the rhythm of guild activities with one members reported they ‘attend exhibitions, meetings and social gatherings’ and another ‘I attend talks, workshops and private views’. Others draw attention to their work being employed as facilitators on workshops and outreach projects, and for others supporting the guild’s cafe was also seen as support ‘eat cakes in the cafe!’. Such support is important as the cafe profits provide a key source of income for the Devon Guild. Others demonstrate that their participation runs deeper, participating in the organisation and management by being a ‘Board member, trustee’ and ‘serving on the selection and election committee’.

As Susan’s experiences highlight, the social and peer support elements of guild membership were raised by many members as reason to join and maintain membership of the guild. Despite the growing use of social media for peer support, the importance of local face-to-face relationships was cited as an important reason for membership. For others, the critical role of peer dialogue in helping them to improve their work was central. It is notable that 54% of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen membership indicated that they met other guild members whom

they identified as personal friends regularly each year (44% a few times a year, 15% at least once a month). Members also reported using their guild connections to routinely support professional collaboration (28%) and selling their work (41%).

For some members, asked about their participation evoked responses of apology: ‘I don’t really’, ‘not enough’, ‘I have not been a great member’, ‘afraid I don’t’. Some of these responses explained their absence noted ‘I live too far away, when I am free of kids there may be more time and I can commit more. Sorry!’. For some this lack of participation was associated with guilt ‘I feel grateful for what I see being done on my behalf and feel a little guilty I do not participate more’. It was notable that more members from the Devon Guild of Craftsmen evoked feeling of disconnection which some of the responses connected with distance: ‘being far away I miss out on local events and companionship’. The Devon Guild opens its membership to makers who live across the South West of Britain region. Given the dispersed rural nature of the region, some members might be a three-hour drive from the guild’s headquarters. For some members, this distance has an impact of their ability to participate: ‘I live a distance away... I used to attend meetings and forums. Price of fuel escalated, [I] can no longer afford to take part’. The guild has tried, with varying success, to find ways to overcome these inter-regional challenges with local events taking place and members organising their own meet ups.

Growing pains: professional challenges to the community of practice

When discussing members sense of ownership and bonds to their guild, there emerges a difference between the responses to the different guilds in the study: the Devon Guild of Craftsmen and the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen. These differences relate to the size,

scale and management of the organisations. The Devon Guild now has a professional staff who take on much of the day to day running of the guild, with much less reliance on the grass roots activity and participation of members that defined the early decades of the organisation's existence. Gloucestershire Guild continues to have a strong member-led ethos, with members undertaking regular activities like organising retail exhibitions and stewarding in the shop alongside the paid retail manager. Some Devon Guild members feel that the professionalisation of the guild organisation has diminished the way in which members can take part: 'the membership are not as involved with the everyday organisation, there are now paid staff for everything!!' or another member noting that the guild had transformed 'from DIY members helping to paid staff doing all the jobs'. For some the professionalisation of the Devon Guild into a crafts development organisation which received public funding has resulted in a loss of connection and ownership for members: 'by taking large amounts of more from funding bodies, guild policy is now largely dictated by them rather than the members'. The members that draw attention to the historical change in feeling from a grassroots organisation to a professional body are often aware of the history of the Devon Guild members decision to buy its own premises in the mid-1980s. Their feelings of loss are the result of decision made by the guild members as they learnt to manage their new capital investment. The membership quickly realised that their cooperative efforts were a risk to the guild and they started to employ professional arts organisers to manage the new enterprise. The Devon Guild retains its constitution as a membership organisation, however the decision to buy a building alongside the work that it takes to maintain this investment did fundamentally change the ethos of this organisation. This issue raises the potential threat that comes from introducing professional staff into a community of practice, and the way in which this changes the social bonds and connections that build over time.

The voices which express a sense of loss about a feeling of belonging linked to the Devon Guild, are not seen in the more grassroots orientated Gloucestershire Guild. It would however be wrong to over-claim craft practitioners desire to be taking a significant role in managing and undertaking organisational work. When asked the direct question ‘Would you like to take on an official role’ 87% of the Gloucestershire Guild and 91% of the Devon Guild members responded negatively. One member who did not want to be part of a grass roots guild summarised their view saying: ‘I want it to be run by properly paid employees, not volunteers’. Members reasons for not wanting to get involved included: ‘My time will be spent on admin and not making’, ‘I dislike committee meetings’, ‘I’m too busy’, ‘I was not looking for this from the guild’, ‘I am burnt out of enthusiasm for committee politics’, ‘I would not fit in’, ‘I live too far away’. The negative feeling about greater involvement suggest that both guilds are negotiating a fine balance of enabling membership to feel connected, whilst not making membership too onerous. For the Devon Guild, this means ensuring the membership know that their voices and opinions matter and are listened to. Many members consider that the staff have judged this well reporting ‘the bulletins send a clear message that involvement is welcomed’ and another member noting ‘I feel I can be as involved as I want to be, which gives me a greater sense of ownership’. The negative desire to get more involved is a more testing management challenge for the Gloucestershire Guild which is more dependent on some paid staff supported by the considerable voluntary labour of committees and working parties, alongside all members stewarding in the shop rota.

The decision in 1985 made by the Devon Guild to change the structure of the organisation by establishing a permanent headquarters raises the issue of whether organisations like guilds are causes of stagnation or forces for innovation within the creative sector. In the 1980s the Devon Guild wanted to do more for its members, and the shift to a more commercial

orientation was a signal of the desire to innovate. Over time the professional staff have maintained this forward momentum through new capital development programmes (such as the decision to extend the building with a new exhibition space) and through curatorial programmes and exhibitions. One member noted the role of the leadership in driving this moment ‘exciting curatorial decisions come from the directors, not the membership’, with another noting the importance of ‘strong and clear leadership’. In many ways, the decision by the Devon Guild to bid for Arts Council funding work as a nationally recognised development agency for the craft sector means that the organisation is now geared towards a pathway that encourages innovation, expects the organisation to serve the professional development of the crafts sector, and to find creative ways to reach to wider and diverse public audiences.

The Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen has, in recent years, also received Arts Council support, with a deliberate aim on behalf of the funding body to support the development of the guild to ensure it continues to serve its members interests and to increase the organisations ability to work with members of the public. For many years the Gloucestershire Guild had a retail shop in the Gloucestershire village of Painswick. Over time this village suffered from reduced footfall, and the retail sales from the guild plummeted. The retail shop became a quiet place where members went to fulfil their stewarding duties, knowing it would be a quiet day to complete their accounts. With the redevelopment of the nearby museum in the bigger population centre of Cheltenham, came the opportunity for the guild to take over a retail space and close their failing retail shop in Painswick. At the time of the research this move was being planned and grants applied for to support the move. The full force of the guild’s skill base was exploited, particularly those makers for who craft was a second career, whose first career skill set proved valuable; those with accounting, fundraising and grant

writing expertise were brought into working parties.

Discussions about the move to Cheltenham at social events, annual general meetings, at exhibitions and in private conversations were all about the exiting potential, set against the awareness that this was a move that would force the guild to raise their profile and ensure that the membership was able to supply a shop that might have a larger turn over, and to provide a regular customer base with a changing display. Key members of the Gloucestershire Guild committee were heavily invested in enabling the move to go smoothly. The voluntary nature of their roles meant they were giving considerable unpaid labour to the guild, sometimes with gritted teeth and a sense that the extra work needed to be endured. The successful hiring of a highly skilled and experienced retail manager whose expertise in the craft sector was widely known and respected was a cause of great relief. As time has gone on, the new retail shop, the Guild at 51, has proved to be a great boon to the Gloucestershire Guild, raising its profile within the national contemporary craft scene and attracting new members who further rejuvenate the membership. Retail sales have increased, the partnership with the Museum means that more workshops for the general public have been possible, and the guild has been able to open its energies towards providing greater opportunities for increasing the professional development to members.

Conclusion

Regional craft guilds have had an enduring place in the lives of designer-makers in the South West of Britain for more than 80 years. As the accounts of makers in this chapter has revealed, despite unprecedented access to retail opportunities and the social connections with other makers through online fora, the role of regional communities of practice, which are

organised to support the retail and professional development of a maker's work remains of great value. The craft membership networks in question offer makers routes to market, the means to connect with other peers, opportunities for professional development and recognition that their work is of high standard.

Craft guilds can also be considered as a community of practice; much of this literature in recent years has focused on knowledge management and business contexts. By looking at craft guilds, we return to the spirit of Lave and Wenger's 1991 work which paid attention to craft practice such as tailors and butchery. The qualitative approach taken in our research emphasises the importance of exploring the situated nature of communities of practice. These craft guilds are not sites where makers routinely predominantly share their craft skills with each other, their making skills have already been honed by the time they join the guild. Instead, following Lave and Wenger's (1991) original discussion of communities of practice as sites of situated learning, these guild communities of practice emerge through the sharing of specific knowledge and expertise, and from a shared desire to secure a livelihood.

Who can become a member of a community of practice, and the routes to membership, are key markers in many typologies (Amin & Roberts 2008). In an otherwise unregulated sector of the creative economy, the ability for makers to gain guild membership, with the associated stamp of a quality threshold that is trusted by external parties, is vital. The importance of the shared understanding of craft skill cemented through membership, is a key marker in establishing and maintaining this community of practice. There is a strong shared understanding of this discourse of craft, based on making high quality, hand made products within the guilds, as can be seen from the ways members talk about their experiences of joining this elite group of makers.

Members of the guilds recognise each other's skills and qualities, share a sense of commonality, and cement this through local interactions that play a distinctive part in securing a livelihood. Successfully joining this community of practice and gaining membership to organisational bodies that judge quality according to certain standards, allows a maker to gain a level of distinction, which in turn enables them to charge appropriately for their work based on their expertise. Indeed, being able to retail products alongside other skilled designer makers offers security in terms of pricing appropriately for the hours of labour invested. In addition, for makers who have formal training and educational qualifications, but largely gain their skill and expertise over time by working with their materials, the lack of formal professional career structures and progression routes can result in feelings of disorientation and not knowing if one's work is good enough or valued by others. These peer-reviewed organisations offer a means of professional development and recognition.

As Roberts (2006: 625) notes, 'communities of practice are not stable or static entities'. The original motivation for the Rural Industries Bureau to supportive development of regional craft guilds in the 1930's was to enable makers to collectively find routes to markets and gain mutual support. The cooperative nature of the guilds continues to attract contemporary makers, even though the organisational ethos has changed over the years. Guild sociality reveals many of Wenger's characteristics of communities of practices: guild spaces recognise the division between professional makers and recreational enthusiasts who may make a living from their craft, but not to the perceived 'standard' set by guild gatekeepers. The responsibility of these gatekeepers in maintaining openness to change and allowing new generations of makers with different processes, techniques, materials and requirements to

enter the organisation is important.

The challenge to these communities of practice emerges in relation to increased professionalisation and the distancing of members from the day-to-day operations of the organisation. As Wenger notes, the characteristics of communities of practice are found in the small acts of bonding between people (Wenger 1998: 125-6). In the context of the guild, members meeting to discuss the organisation of an exhibition, or volunteering time to clean up after an unfortunate flood, are the activities that lead to shared stories, memories and practices. The rise of professional staff has led to the undermining of these small acts of connection at the Devon Guild, creating some tensions that have the potential to erode the strength of the community of practice. In the case of the Devon Guild of Craftsmen and the Gloucestershire Guild of Craftsmen, this challenge to the community of practice has not yet been fully realised. This is perhaps because the membership recognises that, while some small practices have fallen by the wayside, their organisation is stronger for the skills and experience that the professional management brings, and this enables members to spend more time in their studio, creating new work to sell to the public. This suggests that the original vision of the Rural Industries Bureau, to support rural makers by collectivise their efforts, continues to bare dividends.

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